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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine: (1) multicultural beliefs of preservice teachers; (2) participants' feelings of confidence for working with and understanding different multicultural groups; (3) differences between students who function at a low or a high conceptual level in multicultural beliefs; and (4) differences between students who function at a low or a high conceptual level in feelings of confidence for working with and understanding different multicultural groups. The Multicultural Beliefs Instrument and the Hunt Conceptual Level Inventory were administered to early childhood student teachers (N=64) prior to their student teaching experience. The group had been exposed to courses with multicultural components, but no separate course was offered. Results, summarized in four tables, indicate that: significant differences exist among students with high or low conceptual levels, multicultural beliefs, and feelings of confidence; students with a higher conceptual level had more positive belief repsponses than did students with lower conceptual levels; and high conceptual level students expressed more confidence in working with and understanding different multicultural groups. Tables display data on students' multicultural beliefs and their feelings of confidence. (LL)

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# Multicultural Beliefs and Conceptual Level of Early Childhood Preservice Teachers

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# Multicultural Beliefs and Conceptual Level of Early Childhood Preservice Teachers

Prospective teachers should know what they personally believe regarding multicultural education and teaching. This self-awareness will provide teachers with a more realistic personal understanding about how their belief system impacts their teaching. As part of their belief system teachers bring to the classroom their cultural perspectives, biases, prejudices, and misconceptions. How a person approaches problems and processes information is usually consistent with a particular belief system (Banks, 1986; Ramsey, 1987).

The beliefs and knowledge of preservice students about multicultural education need to be addressed because the public school setting is becoming more diverse (Hadaway, 1988; Moultry, 1988). However, the traditional teacher education program is not preparing its future teachers to deal with the complexity and differences in the classroom (Buttery, 1990; Larke, 1990; Mitchell, 1987). Teachers feel unprepared to work in a multicultural environment. Cultural differences are threatening and intercultural communications are awkward for those who have not had some experience or

training in this area. Teachers with positive multicultural beliefs will project more positive attitudes and values for all children.

Beliefs affect how we think or conceptualize and how we conceptualize influences our belief system. Related to this study, conceptual level is a construct that describes the complexity of development and flexibility in the thinking of an individual (Hunt, 1978). Certain teacher behaviors have been associated with low-high conceptual levels. For instance, teachers with high conceptual complexity (a) are more helpful to students in evaluating information, (b) create more diverse learning settings, (c) look at a problem from multiple viewpoints, (d) are more flexible, responsive, and adaptable, (e) need less structure, (f) are more capable of using alternative solutions, and (g) are more tolerant of stress (Hunt, 1978; Hunt, 1967; Murphy, 1970; Rathbone, 1970) Research on the conceptual levels of preservice students as well as their beliefs about multicultural education can provide a rationale for providing a more appropriate cultural perspective in course content, field experiences, and supervision.

The purposes of this study were to determine (a) the multicultural beliefs of preservice teachers; (b) the participants' feelings of confidence for working with and understanding different multicultural groups; (c) the

differences between those students who function at a low or high conceptual level in their multicultural beliefs and (d) the differences between those students who function at a low or high conceptual level in their feelings of confidence for working with and understanding differing multicultural groups.

## Methods

### Subjects

Sixty-four early childhood student teachers at a large southeastern university participated in the study. All the students progressed through the same sequence of courses for three quarters or 10 weeks per quarter. The students had several individual courses with components related to multicultural education; however, there was no separate course which focused on multicultural education in the undergraduate program. The experiences relating to multicultural education included videotapes and slides of multicultural activities, readings, lecture/discussion, and experience in a public school classroom the quarter prior to student teaching. The fourth quarter consisted of student teaching experience in a public school, grades K-4.

### Procedures

The Multicultural Beliefs Instrument and the Conceptual Level Inventory were administered prior to their student teaching experience. The

Multicultural Beliefs and Competency Instrument consists of 22 statements about the teacher's beliefs regarding other cultures and school practices. An additional 29 statements reflect the teacher's feelings of confidence for working with and understanding differing multicultural groups. This instrument was adapted from the survey developed at The Ohio State University (Moultry, 1988).

The Hunt Conceptual Level Inventory (Hunt, 1977) was devised to measure how a person thinks, the subject's cognitive complexity or flexibility. The individual is asked to respond within two minute to each of six incomplete sentences. The six topics (criticism, uncertainty, disagreement) and authority (rules, parents, orders). Scoring is based on a definition of conceptual level as increasing both interpersonal maturity demonstrated by self-definition and self-other relations and conceptual complexity.

## Results

Table 1 summarizes the multicultural beliefs and attitudes of the college students before their student teaching experience. Their feelings of confidence for working with and understanding differing multicultural groups are described in Table 2. Significant differences were found among the students with high/low conceptual level, their multicultural beliefs and their feelings of

confidence. Those findings are summarized in Table 3 and 4. Students with a higher conceptual level had more positive belief responses than those students with a lower conceptual level. The higher conceptual level students also expressed more confidence in working with and understanding differing multicultural groups.

## Discussion

The student teachers were extremely confident about their capabilities in working with children in a multicultural setting. However, less than half expressed an interest in teaching in an inner-city school. The investigators believe the students view multicultural education as more of an isolated segment in the curriculum rather than a process and a total instructional approach with all children. The students were least confident about knowing the child rearing patterns in different cultures which is crucial in understanding and appreciating the child in the school culture. The respondents indicated a lack of confidence related to knowing strategies for a) dealing with racial confrontations; b) reducing prejudices; c) examining own prejuidices and; d) for identifying behaviors indicative of negative racial attitudes. Teacher education programs must challenge students to examine their own cultural environments and their own prejudices. Racial conflict must be addressed

openly and honestly along with discussing appropriate strategies for conflict resolution. Less than half of the students also agreed that differences in the culture of the child and culture of the school will cause conflict. The responses indicated an idealism and naivete about multicultural education. Their beliefs have implications related to their responsiveness, flexibility, and adaptability.

"Ethnic literacy" is needed in teacher preparation to prevent a myopic view of society and the curriculum. Preservice teachers need exposure to students from other cultures along with structured supervision and self-analysis for multicultural beliefs to be translated into the classroom (Cooper, 1990). Larke (1990) suggests several ways to increase the "level of cultural sensitivity of preservice teachers": (a) Multiculturism should be incorporated into all education courses; (b) The field-based experience should reflect cultural diversity; and (c) professors should have experiences to increase their own cultural sensitivity. Communication workshops, travel abroad, community involvement are all ways to encourage the teacher to become more multicultural (Reiff, 1984)

Continued research is needed in this important area of how teachers think, what they believe, particularly about minority children and their

cultures. Research related to multiculturalism must include case studies and indepth analysis of teachers in the field interacting with minority children to verify their purported belief system. Further investigations must consider how teachers construct knowledge and apply their beliefs in the classroom (Reiff & Cannella, 1990) A teacher preparation program should facilitate preservice students own multicultural understanding and their conceptual flexibility.

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Table 1

Summary of Multicultural Beliefs: Part A

| Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree | Mean |
|---|---|
| N=64 | |
| 1. Curricula and textbooks generally ignore the contribution of minorities. | 2.84 |
| 2. Poor discipline in schools is caused by lack of staff knowledge about minority students, their culture, or their community. | 2.66 |
| 3. Minority children can't do as well in school as majority children. | 1.47 |
| 4. The low intelligence of minority children causes poor oral expression. | 1.82 |
| 5. A very important factor for promoting high achievement among any group of students is the teacher's belief that the children can learn. | 4.79 |
| 6. An important factor for successfully mixing children from several races, economic levels or ethnic groups in the schools is the teacher's commitment to making it successful. | 4.55 |
| 7. A teacher who believes a minority student to be a scholar will soon have the student acting like a poor scholar. | 4.65 |
| 8. One important factor for successfully mixing children from several races or ethnic groups is the ability to discuss their differences openly. | 4.34 |
| 9. Teachers neglect children of ethnic minorities when they don't teach them what they teach others. | 4.18 |
| 10. Changing attitude of professional staff who work in schools improves the learning rate of minority group children. | 4.30 |
| 11. Anyone can be successful in the United States today (regardless of race or color) if (s)he is willing to work hard. | 4.37 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 12. Minorities in the United States are disadvantaged because schools and other social institutions do not serve them well. | 2.84 |
| 13. Teachers must help minority children get a better opinion of themselves. | 4.21 |
| 14. I have never had a real conversation with a Black person. | 1.18 |
| 15. I find it difficult to talk with people of another race. | 1.32 |
| 16. I have never had a real conversation with a poor Hispanic person. | 2.60 |
| 17. I would never want to teach in an inner-city school. | 2.68 |
| 18. I have never held a real conversation with a poor Appalachian. | 3.48 |
| 19. Schools are responsive to the individual differences of children. | 3.19 |
| 20. A teacher should know about the culture of minorities. | 4.59 |
| 21. The culture of the school should be more responsive to the minority child. | 4.15 |
| 22. Differences in the culture of the child and culture of the school will cause conflict. | 3.52 |

Table 2

Summary of Feelings of Confidence: Part B

| Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree | Mean |
|---|---|
| N = 64 | |
| 1. Knowing the different patterns of child rearing practices among cultures. | 3.19 |
| 2. Knowing the history of minority groups in the United States. | 3.36 |
| 3. Providing instructional activities that help students to develop strategies for for dealing with racial confrontations. | 3.39 |
| 4. Adapting instructional methods to meet the needs of learners from diverse cultures. | 3.68 |
| 5. Developing materials appropriate for the multicultural classroom. | 3.78 |
| 6. Demonstrating a basic knowledge of the contributions made by minority minority groups to our society. | 3.73 |
| 7. Developing instructional methods to help dispel myths about ethic groups. | 4.03 |
| 8. My feeling that every student can learn. | 4.87 |
| 9. Helping student see cultural groups as real people. | 4.52 |
| 10. Developing activities that increase self-confidence of minority students. | 4.27 |
| 11. Showing how mainstream Americans have adopted clothing, language, etc., from other cultures. | 4.27 |
| 12. Planning instructional activities that reduce prejudice toward other cultural groups. | 3.97 |
| 13. Identifying cultural biases in commercial materials used in instruction. | 4.05 |
| 14. Creating a learning environment that allows for alternative styles of learning. | 4.38 |
| 15. Being direct in expressing feelings to someone from another culture. | 4.15 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 16. Teaching in a multicultural setting. | 4.15 |
| 17. Helping students work through problem situations caused by stereotypical attitudes. | 4.13 |
| 18. Getting students from different cultures to play together. | 4.19 |
| 19. Presenting diversity of culture as a strong positive feature of American American heritage. | 4.12 |
| 20. Getting students from different cultures to work together. | 4.33 |
| 21. Analyzing instructional materials for potential stereotypical attitudes. | 3.97 |
| 22. Assisting all students to understand the feelings of people from other ethnic groups. | 4.07 |
| 23. Helping students examine their prejudices. | 3.98 |
| 24. Identifying how language affects performance on certain test items. | 4.05 |
| 25. Identifying student behaviors that are indicative of negative racial attitudes. | 3.92 |
| 26. Identifying the similarities between Anglo-American and other cultures. | 3.97 |
| 27. Identifying the solutions to problems that may arise as the result of cultural diversity. | 3.72 |
| 28. Developing instructional methods that promote intercultural cohesiveness. | 3.75 |
| 29. Knowing ways in which various cultures contribute to our pluralistic society. | 3.82 |

Table 3

ANOVA Results: Conceptual Level and Multicultural Beliefs

| Source of Variation | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Squares | F | Significance of F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between Groups | 426.58 | 2 | 213.43 | 3.96 | .02 |
| Within Groups | 3345.20 | 62 | 53.96 | | |
| TOTAL | 3772.06 | 64 | | | |

Conceptual Level Means

| | |
|---|---|
| Group 1 (low) | 84.62 |
| Group 2 (average) | 88.08 |
| Group 3 (high) | 95.33 |

Table 4

ANOVA Results: Conceptual Level and Feelings of Confidence

| Source of Variation | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Squares | Significance of F |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between Groups | 1737.10 | 2 | 868.5 | .04 |
| Within Groups | 15582.84 | 62 | 251.34 | |
| TOTAL | 17319.94 | 64 | | |

Conceptual Level Means

| | |
|---|---|
| Group 1 (low) | 107.76 |
| Group 2 (average) | 117.16 |
| Group 3 (high) | 130.67 |